

Article

A Hermeneutic for and from Reading Kierkegaard's *For Self-Examination*

Nathan Eric Dickman Humanities Division, University of the Ozarks, Clarksville, AR 72830, USA; ndickman@ozarks.edu

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Abstract: This essay provides a close reading of Kierkegaard's later signed text, *For Self-Examination*. While many of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous texts often are selected for their philosophically explicit engagements with Hegelian philosophy, I use Hegel's dialectic of lordship and bondage to draw out how Kierkegaard circumvents it in this one. I first provide historical context, noting how Kierkegaard turned to earnest works after his public humiliation in the Copenhagen newspaper, undermining his ability to deploy irony effectively. Second, I briefly develop Hegel's lordship and bondage dialectic as a model for how selfhood is constituted through work and labor. Third, I dwell with a close reading of Kierkegaard's book both in its composition and in its interpretation, bringing out how it donates grace rather than work (à la Hegel) to the reader's attempt at self-realization. I conclude by noting one challenge to Kierkegaard's ideal of addressing the "single individual" from the perspective of intersectional analysis.

Keywords: Kierkegaard; subjectivity; Hegel; lordship and bondage dialectic; self-examination; Lutheranism

1. From Irony to Earnestness

Kierkegaard's text *For Self Examination*, published in 1851, is among the works capping what Howard and Edna Hong have argued constitute Kierkegaard's "second authorship". The appendix to *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, published 1846, entitled "A First and Last Explanation", indicates Kierkegaard's plan to terminate his writing, and this marks the end of his "first [predominately pseudonymous] authorship". But the "tribal revenge" taken on Kierkegaard when the national press subjected him "to Danish humor and the Copenhagen laugh" through a series of cartoons accenting several of his various eccentricities (such as the uneven trousers, the hunched back, and the umbrella), in what has been called the *Corsair Affair* of 1846, seems to have not only forced Kierkegaard to take up his pen again, but also to write in a new form (Poole 1993, p. 15). Whereas in tandem with his earlier writings, he could stroll the streets and engage in public discussion about his pseudonymous works (as Poole argues was an essential part of his indirect communication), after the affair, he could no longer take advantage of his existential presence in the same way. Kierkegaard's public body was robbed from him (his life's work now reduced to a matter of the length of his pants), and thus, "his ironic cover had been blown" (Poole 1993, p. 15).

Besides two significant works by the pseudonym "Anti-Climacus", the second authorship consists predominantly of texts signed by Kierkegaard. Yet this does not mean that he gave up his method of indirect communication as well, for "pseudonymity is not itself indirection" (Poole 1993, p. 4). Since the entire town had become ironic, he could no longer sustain this ironic mode of indirection "for one cannot efficiently manage irony in the face of irony" (Poole 1993, p. 21). However neat, effective, and pleasing that ironic device may be, Kierkegaard continues to resist speaking to the reader directly in his later signed works. As Strawser writes, "They are explicitly textual discourses, in which the goal of the indirect, maieutic method remains valid, as they accordingly petition the personal appropriation

of each single reader” (Strawser 1997, p. 174). Instead of rigorous irony, the later texts are filled with existential pathos, personal responsibility, and deeper inwardness (an inwardness that, as we shall see, is expressible). Whereas the key concept to the earlier texts is “double-reflection”, or the leap, the key concept in the later texts is “reduplication”—one’s embodiment in what one communicates (Poole 1993, p. 25). Since this later development of the mode of indirect communication appeals to the reader in existential pathos, the reader is individually responsible for bearing the meaning of the later texts. I take up this close study of *FSE*’s connection with philosophical hermeneutics because there are few works engaging the text in this way to draw out relevance for other areas of philosophy, such as Berry’s exposure of sexist bias in it (see Berry 1997) and Simmons’s elaboration of its solidarity with Pentecostal philosophy (see Simmons 2017). I bring in a Hegelian-informed hermeneutic to illuminate productive ways Kierkegaard undermines it with this text.

Bishop Mynster is one of Kierkegaard’s inspirations for his critique of Hegelianism. Mynster had critiqued the Hegelianism of the leading scholars of the time, Heiberg and Martensen. Mynster consistently argued against the Hegelians that one must affirm the law of excluded middle rather than eliminate strict distinctions, as Hegel appeared to do (Stewart 2003, p. 79). Mynster also confirmed Kierkegaard in 1828. Kierkegaard and his father had had a favorable opinion of Mynster. And although Kierkegaard was frustrated by Mynster’s pastoral care for him at the time of his father’s death, textual evidence in the early writings indicates Kierkegaard supported Mynster’s arguments promoting the law of excluded middle contra the Hegelians (see Stewart 2003, p. 80). Yet Kierkegaard gradually became estranged from Mynster, who came to represent for Kierkegaard the cultural accommodation of Christianity (Hong and Hong 1990, p. xi). Mynster appears to be a target of critique in *FSE*. Kierkegaard had hoped that Mynster would “clear the air by making an admission and confession of the accommodation of Christianity to the ‘demands of the times’” (Hong and Hong 1990, p. xii).

Scholarship emphasizing Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous writings often consists of attempts to resolve the question of Kierkegaard’s Hegelianism and is particularly concerned with Kierkegaard’s unique view of a dialectically intrapersonal self (see Russell 2009).¹ The question is sometimes posed in a totalizing “yes” or “no” form. Stewart’s study “supplies ample evidence that Kierkegaard’s relation to Hegel is considerably more differentiated than it is usually thought to be” (Stewart 2003, p. 615), and provides a helpful framework for my hermeneutic approach to *FSE*. It is not that Kierkegaard necessarily preserves a single relation to Hegel, but over the course of his authorship (and even within individual texts) shows signs of varying degrees of appropriation and critique. Stewart divides Kierkegaard’s relation to Hegel into three periods. In the first period (1834–1843), Kierkegaard’s writings are marked by a positive reception of Hegel’s thought. In the second period (1843–1846), Kierkegaard shifts toward polemical critique of not so much Hegel himself, but the Danish Hegelians. The third period (1847–1855) is marked by the almost complete absence of a relation to Hegel, because Hegel is rarely mentioned explicitly in the texts or journals after 1847. Although *FSE* belongs to this third period, I want to bring Hegel to bear on this text as part of my hermeneutic. Hegel is not mentioned once in it. Yet it is safe to assume that Hegelianism thoroughly influences Kierkegaard’s thought over the span of his corpus, even into this period of primarily signed works. *The Sickness Unto Death* by the later pseudonym Anti-Climacus, published just a few years before *FSE* in 1849, is thoroughly Hegelian in its method and in its language, yet also never mentions Hegel. Whereas it seemed obligatory in the earlier pseudonymous works to indicate the stance (positive or negative) taken toward Hegel’s thought, in this text, the author remains neutral.

¹ This ongoing and well-documented focus on pseudonymous works and questions concerning the consistency of Kierkegaard’s writings involves numerous voices from Matustik and Westphal (1995), to Mooney (1996, 2013), to Taylor (2000), to Podmore (2011), to Stokes (2015), to Klee (2017), to Rush (2020), and more. Readers interested in Kierkegaard studies should turn to these next, though for now I hope you join me in trying to understand just this little part of Kierkegaard’s complicated corpus.

Although Kierkegaard may not explicitly mention Hegel in his later signed texts, we can still bring a Hegelian mode of thinking to bear on interpreting them. It is my contention that if we approach *FSE* with a Hegelian framework in mind, we will come to a more nuanced appreciation of Kierkegaard's Lutheran understanding of "grace" as opposed to "works" in this specific text. That is, we as readers will come to understand more discretely what Kierkegaard means by works and grace in this text itself. By applying, for instance, Hegel's lordship and bondage dialectic, we can open a path for elaborating on the inwardness and self-consciousness Kierkegaard seeks to engender in readers. The bondsperson comes to self-realization through work, whereas the lord or master dissolves in passive consumption. There seems to be no room for grace here. Readers, too, ought to come to some sort of self-realization in working through Kierkegaard's text. By imagining Luther's response to Kierkegaard's own generation, Kierkegaard writes that Luther would seek to emphasize James and James' emphasis on work, "in order to cause the need for grace to be felt deeply in genuine humble inwardness and, if possible, to prevent grace . . . from being taken totally in vain" (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 24). Yet, this text dislodges the reader from the lordship and bondage dialectic and the specific kind of work therein, and this dislodgment seems to be the experience of freedom and grace that Kierkegaard seeks to engender in readers. Hermeneutically speaking, what determines whether or not Kierkegaard's text works on a reader, what determines the meaning of the text is neither the authorial power nor the reader's caprice, but the text or Word itself in a kerygmatic proclamation (cf. Plummer 2010, pp. 127–42; Porter 2012).

2. Hegel on Work in the Struggle for Recognition

Ricoeur, in his text on the polysemy of the concept "recognition", notes that Hegel's determination of natural selfhood is partly a response to Hobbes' development of the social contract from the supposed "state of nature" (Ricoeur 2005, p. 161). Hegel's goal is to determine the moment and logic of recognition, and the emergence of self-consciousness, more precisely. The self, as in self-consciousness, for Hegel, only arises within the face-to-face of consciousness with itself, insofar as in this context consciousness turns back in upon itself in such a way that "the identity of itself with itself becomes explicit for it" (Hegel 1977, §166). Hegel writes, "Self-consciousness is the reflection out of the being of the world of sense and perception, and is essentially the return from otherness" (Hegel 1977, §166). But this return to itself has a doubling effect: two consciousnesses turn back in upon themselves and thus, two self-consciousnesses arise in the confrontation. Self-consciousness, then, "exists only in being acknowledged" (Hegel 1977, §178). This discloses, for Hegel, the intersubjectivity definitive of genuine selfhood (see Taylor 2000, p. 193; Frank 2004).

In order to achieve a certainty of itself in the face of another, in the confrontation, it must determinately negate the other of itself. As Hegel writes, "It must supersede this otherness of itself" (Hegel 1977, §180). Butler warns that we should not assume that this determinate negation has something to do with nothingness:

on the contrary, as a differentiating relation that mediates the terms that initially counter each other, negation, understood in the sense of *Aufhebung*, cancels, preserves, and transcends the apparent differences it interrelates. (Butler 2004, p. 69)

In canceling and yet preserving, the confrontation is a "life-and-death" struggle (Hegel 1997, §187). Hegel construes this struggle in terms of lordship and bondage, where one self-consciousness apparently establishes its complete independence and autonomy, and the other is objectified and subjected. These dialectical operators of "lordship" and "bondage" need not represent actual people competing for power, but may denote components of a single individual or even non-human dimensions of reality. These concepts correlate with similar dialectics between, for instance, possibility and actuality, ideality and reality, or even word and deed.

The bondsperson cannot successfully assert autonomy, and thus, the master holds the bondsperson in subjection (Hegel 1977, §194). But the bondsperson's self-consciousness still achieves genuine self-realization, though it is through the toil of labor and work (Hegel 1977, §190–94). As Hegel writes,

This consciousness has been fearful, not of this or that particular thing or just at odd moments, but its whole being has been seized with dread; for it has experienced the fear of death, the absolute Lord . . . Through *work*, however, the bondsman becomes conscious of what he truly is... It is precisely in his *work* wherein he seemed to have only alienated existence that he acquires [himself]. (Hegel 1977, §194–96; my emphasis)

This work of the bondsperson's self-consciousness, Taylor writes, "is not [a] thoroughgoing negation of objectivity, but is the subject's transformation of the object into its own image" (Taylor 2000, p. 194). Through infusing and changing material through work, the bondsperson makes something of oneself through expanding oneself into the products of one's labor.

Both the master and the bondsperson each achieve a form of independence, then. On the one hand, the master realizes an insufficient form of independence because, while it risks all in the struggle by being willing to give up everything to preserve its absolute freedom, it never gains the mutual recognition between equals necessary for self-realization (see Kojève 1969, p. 49). The bondsperson, on the other hand, does not actually realize one's ideal independence, but yet is free from instinct and desire insofar that one can work toward independence in yearning shaped by regulative ideals (Kojève 1969, p. 49). It is the laborer who achieves genuine self-realization through the practical activity of work. As Taylor writes, "practical activity is a process of double negation in which the subject negates its abstract indeterminacy by expressing itself in its [product], and then negates this negation by reappropriating the other of itself" (Taylor 2000, p. 199).

For this study of Kierkegaard's *FSE*, it is important to highlight two features of Hegel's dialectic of recognition. First, genuine self-realization is only achievable in the face of and under the subjection of some sort of master. Second, genuine self-realization only occurs in and through work.² The bondsperson makes oneself real—more real—by an expansion of self into the products of one's labor. Like a child throwing a rock into a pond saying, "Look at what I can do", so do laborers exteriorize themselves in their works they produce (see Hegel 1997, p. 58). There are three senses of the word "work" that I would like to highlight here. As a noun, it denotes an object produced through a variety of techniques, and this is technically speaking the object of the effort. As a verb, it means labor in the sense of what is done. It denotes proper functioning, as well. That is, we can say "That works" when a process or function satisfies a need. All three of these senses of the word "work" are helpful in analyzing Kierkegaard's text. Is there room for "grace" in the sense of liberation from work or practical action determined by regulative ideals (the Law) in Hegel's dialectic if the bondsperson only achieves proper self-realization through one's own work?

There may be, as Ricoeur argues, alternative models of mutual recognition that do not include a death struggle. Moreover, Hegel's influence might not be historically or psychologically present in Kierkegaard's texts. What is crucial for my hermeneutic is Hegel's method of "determinate negation" and notion of "work", for it is these that form a backdrop for drawing out a potential liberating inwardness from this text.

3. The Text as Master and the Death of Both Author and Reader

Hermeneutically speaking, Kierkegaard's text successfully navigates between two extremes: the fallacy of authorial intent and the fallacy of readerly caprice (Ricoeur 1976, p. 30). The text itself, or really, the Word itself, is semantically autonomous from both attempts to control the Word's meanings. Judging by the title alone, *FSE* is centered on self-realization, and suggests a vote for readerly caprice. Yet Kierkegaard makes explicit that this text is an inquiry into what kind of life he and his readers are leading and what must be done ("work") in order to come to proper self-realization (Kierkegaard 1990,

² I use "realization" in the double sense of knowledge or insight and—as I elaborate—of making real.

p. 110).³ It is surprising that in classic works on Kierkegaard's notion of "self", there is little to no reference to this text. Taylor, for example, claims (drawing heavily from the pseudonymous texts) that for Kierkegaard, the self is defined in opposition to others, that in the journey to meet the alien "god", the wayfarer is carried "farther and farther from human community, until at last [the] self is completely isolated from other[s]" (Taylor 2000, p. 272). But not only is this self set against others, it is also set against the god, because in Taylor's diagnosis, Kierkegaard's "reified dualisms make reunification impossible" (Taylor 2000, p. 269). Taylor contrasts this supposedly Kierkegaardian view of the self and its relation to this god with Hegel's essentially intersubjective understanding of selfhood and the possibility of a mediated relation to a god (Taylor 2000, p. 275). Yet if we as readers approach *FSE* with a Hegelian framework in mind, we might find less of a reified dualism between our subjectivity or inwardness, that of others, and the alien god (cf. Mooney 2013).

As noted above, for Hegel, proper self-realization occurs in the context of the lordship and bondage dialectic, and is achieved only by the bondsperson's self-consciousness in and through works. And, quite obviously, even for Kierkegaard, in order to attain appropriate self-realization, it is necessary (at least at first) that the triune god assume, as well as be granted, the position of "master" while the self assumes that position of "servant" of this god. For the Kierkegaard of *FSE*, it is the god with whom one struggles to the death, the death struggle through which one is reborn from the life of work to the liberation of grace (see Mooney 2013, p. 198). As Kierkegaard writes, "death goes in between, dying to, and a life on the other side of death—yes, that is a new life" (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 76). As Ramsey corroborates, "According to Kierkegaard, the image of God does not exist in [humanity] as possible bases of claims for self; [humanity] only exists in the image of God whenever [one] consents to 'be nothing through the act of worship'" (Ramsey 1948, p. 176). One must realize one is nothing before the god, that the god is everything. Only in this way can one be liberated from the kind of work required by the course of recognition for self-realization or making something of oneself. In other words, if the self is in a proper relation of service to the god, rather than being self-serving, then one can achieve proper self-realization on the other side of the struggle for recognition with the god. For Kierkegaard, reading this god's Word is the site of the struggle for recognition in which self-negation can occur, for this god's Word is the expression and exteriorization of the god (Kierkegaard 1990, pp. 39–40).

Kierkegaard delineates a method readers must follow so that readers can "see" (or realize) themselves in the mirror of the Word. Whittaker proposes that whatever texts readers encounter as having "an unusual power to reveal ourselves to ourselves", in that people not only *see* themselves in the text but also *find* themselves in it, there readers encounter the Word (Whittaker 2002, p. 265). But for the mirror to work, Kierkegaard claims readers cannot simply "look at the mirror" by applying historical-critical (or other) methods. Instead readers must "see [themselves] in the mirror" when they read the Word by incessantly repeating that, "It is I to whom it is speaking; it is I about whom it is speaking" (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 35). This emphasis on the reading "I" has a doubling impact. On the one hand, the method increases existential pathos and inwardness where readers are to take everything personally. On the other hand, the method intensifies self-negation in the sense of clearing the way for a new self to be realized.

Even though Whittaker claims that many texts can be the Word, Kierkegaard seems to think either only the Christian Bible can function as the Word or the Christian Bible is the best instantiation of it. Simultaneously, we as readers however should be able to recognize and realize ourselves in light of Kierkegaard's text if we read it with Kierkegaard's method. And we can see this in his relentless effort to efface his authority as the author within *FSE*. That is, the rhetoric makes explicit attempts at the death of the author celebrated in poststructuralist literary criticism. He repeatedly writes that he is a poet "without authority" (Kierkegaard 1990, pp. 17, 21–22). Kierkegaard claims he is "an unauthorized

³ While separately published and self-contained books, I will be using materials from the later *Judge For Yourself!* as further framework and context for the content of *For Self-Examination*.

poet who at most is fighting for the confession of our weakness . . . ” (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 133). As he writes, Kierkegaard effaces himself in writing of himself as without authority. He displaces himself as holding the master position in the Hegelian struggle for recognition. Kierkegaard steps out of the way so that his *listener* might achieve as direct as possible a relation with the Word. For example, he pleads with his *listener* to forget the speaker and the speech of his text itself and instead go promptly to *read aloud* the day’s text, James 1:22–27 (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 46). In reading aloud, the reader transitions from scanning text to listening to speech, but it is the speech of the reader’s own voice grafted to Kierkegaard’s composition (we will return to this in more detail below). Just as, for Gadamer, interpretations disappear (Gadamer 1989a, p. 398), so also does Kierkegaard himself disappear into the background of the reading of and listening to his text. His writing in this way complicates the nature of reading in that he provides a catalyst for the Word to be voiced rather than presenting himself as a master who subjects the reader as a bondsperson who must work through his text.

Kierkegaard employs this maieutic device of effacement to present or project, in Ricoeur’s language, a possible self that the listening ego is attracted to and might try on (Ricoeur 1976, p. 95). The possible self Kierkegaard presents for the reader or listener to come to realize through engagement with his text is the single individual determined by the inwardness and earnestness that comes with honest self-consciousness in the mirror of the Word (see Kierkegaard 1990, p. 110). As Kierkegaard writes, “I have worked to arouse restlessness oriented toward inward deepening” (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 21).

To arouse this restlessness, Kierkegaard starkly contrasts ideality and reality by setting ideals in bold relief from actual practices. He asks, for instance, how can it be the case that someone who enjoys the luxuries of life be blessed equally to one who suffers for the truth, who is misunderstood even by their closest friends (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 23)? Kierkegaard describes this as a contrast between inauthentic and authentic Christian existence:

I want especially to strive to make us conscious of how this all hangs together, how we understand ourselves in this matter, with what right we call ourselves Christians when actuality, Monday, is so misrelated to the solemnity of Sunday . . . and whether, if our Christianity is as Monday (actuality) is with us, all of us together . . . are not compelled to make a confession to Christianity (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 232)

Kierkegaard notes the gap between ideality and actuality, between words and deeds, between Sunday and Monday, and in this rests another attempt at arousing inwardness—particularly in the direction of either confession or genuine imitation of Christ. He emphasizes and models confession. In this sense, Kierkegaard exemplifies Nietzsche’s “ascetic priest” insofar as Kierkegaard increases inwardness by emphasizing ideals (see Nietzsche 2008). Kierkegaard writes, “may [the reader] take his time, for we shall, to be sure, go further into the subject. But whoever you are, have confidence, yield yourself. There can be no question of my using force, I who of all people am the weakest . . . ” (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 12). Here, we see Kierkegaard further effacing himself as the master or one with authority, positioning himself as in the subordinate or bondsperson position. Yet recall (and we will return to it again below) this “I” is the voice of the reader grafted with Kierkegaard’s composition.

However, Kierkegaard cannot simply arouse restlessness, cannot simply expect the reader to see herself in the mirror of the Word, for human beings are much too adept at evasion strategies. Kierkegaard delineates at least three ways in which readers generate problems for themselves in realizing and acknowledging the authority and power of the Word itself (cf. Plummer 2010, p. 127). First, he notes that while Biblical scholarship apparently enables people appropriately to understand the Word,

One could almost be tempted to assume that this is craftiness, that we do not really want to see ourselves in that mirror and therefore have concocted all this . . . that we then honor with the laudatory name of scholarly and profound and serious research. (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 26)

Kierkegaard's hermeneutic for interpreting the Word as well as for interpreting his own text is to confess honestly about one's prejudices, those prejudices that disable understanding rather than enabling it (see [Gadamer 1989a](#)). Historical criticism of a text is not to read it—or at least, not to read it existentially. It is a way readers assume the posture of the master over the bondsperson of the text or author.

Second, he notes how the constructions of objective doctrines and cultured interpretations enable people to keep themselves out of the picture or out of the mirror of the Word. Kierkegaard claims that scholars have fabricated the notion that to think about oneself, that is, to read the Word *subjectively* is vain (see [Kierkegaard 1990](#), p. 36). He writes,

Oh, what depth of cunning! One makes God's Word into something impersonal, objective, a doctrine—instead of its being the voice of God ... This is the way the fathers heard it, this terrifying voice of God ... This impersonality (objectivity) in relation to God's Word is all too easy for us human beings to maintain ... [and] is neither more nor less than a lack of conscience. ([Kierkegaard 1990](#), pp. 39–40)

Readers maintain a dispassionate disposition with regard to the Word, as if it were a mere curiosity or trivia. This applies not merely to academically oriented readers. Many contemporary Christians approach the Bible like a Magic 8-Ball, seeking “the” answer to their questions by ripping this or that line out of context. In these ways, readers attempt to position themselves as the master over the bondspersons of the text and author.

Third, Kierkegaard notes how big promises (such as, “I will never forget God's Word”) actually engender forgetfulness and a lack of prompt action in accord with the Word. He illustrates this with the examples of two gamblers—one that says, “After tonight, I will never gamble again”. And another that says, “I will not gamble tonight, but after tonight I may gamble every night for the rest of my life” ([Kierkegaard 1990](#), p. 45). In the latter case, you fool the craving by making it wait and thus, are able to act promptly in accord with the promise. And this, for Kierkegaard, applies to the Word, that readers ought to act promptly in accord with whatever little readers have understood of the Word rather than promising to act once readers have understood all of it. That is, a reader evades getting to work, of assuming the role of the bondsperson. In these three ways, Kierkegaard sees Christendom taking the Word, and the grace it purports to bring, in vain.

Considering all of these evasion tactics and more, Kierkegaard wonders whether people just do not want to hear the Word. In order for proper self-realization to occur (in order for it to *work*), Kierkegaard must defend against these evasion strategies. Thus, he finds confession necessary, both on his part and on the part of his readers. He quotes from James in this regard: “If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless” (James 1:26). To keep from deceiving themselves, readers must keep a “tight rein on [their] tongue”; in other words, readers must either make sure that their words and their deeds correspond, or at least acknowledge the gap between their words and deeds. Although this acknowledgment of the gap, this confession, may seem like a lot of work to ask of his readers, Kierkegaard models the behavior for readers: “Believe me (I say it to my own shame), I, too, am all too pampered ... I confess my weakness, and even to you, my reader, do I not? Then you will also confess yours, not to me—no, that is not required—but to yourself and to God” ([Kierkegaard 1990](#), p. 12). For Kierkegaard, one of two things will happen when readers make such a confession: either they will be motivated in the direction of imitation of the heroes of faith, or they will humble themselves ([Kierkegaard 1990](#), pp. 69–70).

Yet both directions result in achieving consistency between word and deed. On the one hand, imitating the witnesses to the truth brings readers' action into accord with their words. On the other hand, humbling yourself brings your words into accord with your actions. Kierkegaard labels this correspondence between word and deed “reduplication”, which in general means, as Walsh writes, “to exist in what one thinks, to express one's understanding in one's action in order to realize a fusion of

thought and being in existence, not merely conceptually or abstractly but actually" (Walsh 2005, p. 10). Kierkegaard's Socrates exemplifies such reduplication when, on trial, rather than accepting a speech constructed by persuasive orators designed for him to deliver to the court, he speaks for himself and uses solely the ideas he had been living in his entire life: "I can say a few words without the help of artful orators . . . and the circumstance that I most likely will be sentenced to death makes no difference" (Kierkegaard 1990, pp. 9–10; see Plato 2002, p. 22). Earnest authenticity is the only work that can facilitate full self-realization.

It is important to note how different reduplication is from the hidden inwardness of Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes de Silentio's "knight of faith" (see Kierkegaard 1983; cf. Evans 2006, pp. 209–62). If correspondence between word and deed is necessary for honest self-realization, then it is also necessary that faith is noticeable in a person's life. As Kierkegaard's imaginary Luther claims, "Faith is a restless thing . . . When one does not feel the pulse of faith in your life, then you do not have faith . . . In other words, faith, this restless thing, should be recognizable in [one's] life" (Kierkegaard 1990, pp. 18–19). However deep and inward faith is in a person's life, it must be correlated with outward expression. Faith is testable. It is a work.

Yet without honest examination of oneself in the mirror of the Word, neither faith nor humility would be possible—it simply will not work as long as humans deceive themselves in bad faith. In distinguishing deed and word, actuality and ideality, Kierkegaard attempts to designate how far his age is from living up to the requirements of faith or authenticity (see Dickman 2013). Kierkegaard sees his age as seduced by as well as longing for mere words and "assurances" such as, "If it were required that I give everything to the poor, then I would do it". And he sees these hypothetical heroes held up and honored as if they actually did something heroic (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 136). Kierkegaard suggests that perhaps the listeners to the "assurances" require such contradictory proclamations "so that Christianity will not become too earnest" or authentic (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 137; see Dickman 2013, p. 110). Since earnestness is single individuality and passionate inwardness, listening to "assurances" is precisely what the world wants in order to evade and avoid proper self-realization. In Kierkegaard's analysis, the assurance functions as a façade of faith, a pseudo-authenticity, and deceives people into thinking they can have their mouths full of cake and whistle at the same time (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 133; see Adorno 2002). Rather than work on themselves in light of the mirror, toiling like bondspersons to achieve exteriorization and expansion of themselves, people evade integrity.

This contradiction, Kierkegaard writes, "simply will not work. In order for this to work . . . there must first be a confession that this proclamation of Christianity . . . is not *really* Christianity . . . " (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 133). Kierkegaard is not requiring that his readers venture out in the direction of imitation, to bring their actions into correspondence with their words; rather, he requires that his readers bring their words into correspondence with their deeds. He demonstrates this point by claiming that the fact there are one thousand preachers says nothing about the existence or nonexistence of Christianity. What does it demonstrate, he asks? "It demonstrates there are one thousand jobs—no more and no less" (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 124). For the mirror of the Word to work, it seems that Kierkegaard's readers must have this kind of critical honesty with themselves. With this approach, Kierkegaard writes,

you will read a fear and trembling into your soul so that, with God's help, you will succeed in becoming a human being, a personality, rescued from being this dreadful nonentity into which we humans, created in the image of God, have been bewitched, an impersonal, an objective something. (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 43)

In other words, our propensity to evade the work of reading in honest, earnest authenticity is simultaneously our lobbying for the position of the passive and all-consuming lordship or master.

As we have seen, neither Kierkegaard himself as the author nor readerly evasive caprice control the meaning of the Word. In this way, the Word itself takes the position of lordship in the Hegelian dialectical model I am using to draw out Kierkegaard's hermeneutic. Let us turn to examine more thoroughly the reader's role as the bondsperson of the text.

4. Kierkegaard's Reader as Bondsperson Subjected to the Word

In the preface to *FSE*, Kierkegaard asks his reader to read his text aloud. He claims that “by reading aloud you will gain the strongest impression that you have only yourself to consider” (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 3). If the reader subjects their self to reading aloud, the reader assumes the position or locality of the bondsperson's self-consciousness in relation to the text. Thus, the reading aloud is the work that readers perform on the text and on themselves in order for the event of reading to function properly. The readers graft their voice to the composition of the text (Dickman 2014, p. 562). Reading Kierkegaard's words aloud idiosyncratically modulates them; the reader reads with her own personal mode of emphasis in her attempts to bring the sound and the meaning into harmony (Gadamer 1989b, p. 96). Thus, readers are not simply repeating Kierkegaard's words, but speaking them and hearing them spoken in a certain way, in a certain tone: *one's own*. The tone, rhythm, and mood break the spell on the letters, and brings forth the particularity of the reader (Strawser 1997, p. 184). And this transforms the texts into a living conversation (Strawser 1997, p. 186).

On the topic of reading aloud, Gadamer writes that, “When one reads aloud one reads to someone, and that means one turns and addresses him or her” (Gadamer 1989b, p. 47). But in the special case of Kierkegaard's text, the voice works backward because the one to whom one has turned is oneself. In this way, one turns in upon oneself and comes to reflect upon oneself in much the same way that Hegel's two consciousnesses turn in upon themselves and reach self-consciousness. This soliloquy of sorts, an internal dialogue with oneself, intensifies self-awareness and increases subjectivity and inwardness for the reader. This is part of the necessary self-work that must be done to read the Word well.

Yet the reading remains, to some degree, a dialogue with Kierkegaard. In Gadamer's words, “No one is as alert in one's self-critique as one is when one is critiqued by another” (Gadamer 1997, p. 497). The critique and examination Kierkegaard engenders results from his emphasis on the difference between ideals and actuality. The readers come to measure themselves in light of the ideals that Kierkegaard describes, and thus, achieve a fuller understanding of themselves and thus, are more capable in actualizing or realizing themselves with earnest authenticity. One needs others so that one may reflect on oneself and come to further self-understanding. And by bringing Kierkegaard's words into speech, by conjuring up Kierkegaard's spirit in this way (see Kierkegaard 1990, p. 43), he and the reader are, in some sense, present together in dialogue. They are—Kierkegaard and the reader—contemporaneous with one another (see Gadamer 1989a, pp. 127–28). Reading aloud allows the achievement of “absolute contemporaneousness” (Gadamer 1976, p. 54; Kierkegaard 1985) necessary for a face-to-face between Kierkegaard and his listener. And this is, for Gadamer, the hermeneutical task. In the pulse of living language, the back and forth of dialogue with one another, one opens oneself to and thus, belongs with others in an event of understanding. The reader's labor, then, is the work of dialogue and the “object” on which the reader must work is oneself.

Kierkegaard insists, recall, that the appropriate way to read the Word is to say incessantly that, “It is I to whom it is speaking, and it is I about whom it is speaking.” Yet this becomes the model for all honest reading where readers seek to come to earnest self-realization. And thus, the reader should apply this hermeneutical model to Kierkegaard's text as well. This precisely is the way in which Kierkegaard designed his text to be read, as evidenced by his request that it be read aloud. Reading aloud allows the reader, Kierkegaard's listener, not only the space necessary for personal reflection, but also the possibility to contribute to and share in the making the meaning of the text. Thus, reading aloud also allows for the alienation and estrangement necessary for self-realization. As Hegel writes, “It is the word which, when uttered, leaves behind, externalized and emptied, him who uttered it, but which is as immediately heard, and only this hearing of its own self is the existence of the Word” (Hegel 1977, §770). The “I” exteriorized in writing is existentially appropriated in reading.

A face-to-face with Kierkegaard is not the only dynamic achieved in reading the texts aloud; the reader also is initiated into patterns of imitation. Recall above that the text suggests the only option is confession, not imitation. Thus, ironically, Kierkegaard trains readers in the practice of imitation. When

Kierkegaard calls for a confession from his readers, he models that behavior as well—but by reading his confession aloud, the reader has begun to imitate Kierkegaard and make a confession oneself. Thus, whatever he writes become existential possibilities for the reader's own life (see Ricoeur 1976). Part of the reader's work is to actualize these possibilities, and these possibilities are actualized in reading the text aloud—it seems that in reading a confession aloud in one's own voice, one has, at least in some respect, made a confession. That is, readers come to the realization—in the sense of making real—of themselves as confessors and achieve the very integration of themselves Kierkegaard seeks.

One possibility that Kierkegaard presents is of particular interest. In his effort to efface his authority as the author, Kierkegaard, in some respects, steps out of the way so that the reader may confront and may be confronted by the god in the form of the Word. In Kierkegaard's move, his move towards "doing nothing" is to stand in the way between his listener and the god; the reader comes to understand that "doing nothing" may be the most difficult work (see Kierkegaard 1995, p. 218). Yet, this paradoxical "doing nothing" becomes a genuine possibility for the reader, too. And it denotes, for Kierkegaard, the jest of work: whenever one does something, it is nevertheless really the god who does the work (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 186).

It is really the god who does the work, for the Lutheran Kierkegaard, because one's own works are completely inadequate for the task of proper self-realization in the mirror of the Word. The work cannot be one's own, for, as Barrett writes, "not even good but imperfect works can provide the basis for a relationship with God" (Barrett 2002, p. 84). Kierkegaard illustrates this point in *Judge for Yourself!* with the model of a child, Little Ludvig, sweating and puffing while pushing his stroller, not noticing his mother above and behind really doing the work (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 185). Yet the reader, like Little Ludvig, is capacitated to enjoy oneself and expend oneself in the so-called "work". As Gadamer explains, in play, the players find meaning in the game by spending themselves on the task put to them by the game (Gadamer 1989a, p. 110). Everything comes from the god, it seems, and nothing (really) from Little Ludvig or the reader. Rather, they are present to play in grace and enjoyment. The point here is that although readers seem to take the position of the bondsperson in the Hegelian dialectic, readers technically are liberated from the work without even realizing it—if they do the work of reading aloud.

Kierkegaard further explicates this point through an illustration about a seamstress: when she understands that it is really the god who sews, it is not that that she will lay her hands on her lap, but will accept the gracious jest that it is precisely in her sewing that it is really the god who sews (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 183). Cain concludes from this that, for Kierkegaard, proper self-realization of one's nothingness before the god is knowledge of oneself as nothing "except the something that omnipotence capacitates nothingness to be" (Cain 2002, p. 325). This, for Cain, is the freeing jest of work: "one's 'all' is nothing but ... this 'nothing' does not negate but rather *liberates* one's all" (Cain 2002, p. 330). For Kierkegaard, then, it is the god who fulfills the roles of both the lord and the bondsperson insofar as the god is both the mirror and the worker in the reader. The single individual, Kierkegaard's reader, is thus dislodged from the dialectic and freed from those determinations of working in the face of the lord, which seemed, for Hegel, to constitute proper self-realization.

5. The Work of Grace in an Existentially Liberating Hermeneutic

The hermeneutic I have developed from and with Kierkegaard navigates between the extremes of subjection to the Word and dominance over words. Interpreting the text is to allow the text to do its work on the reader, not to discover the author's intent or impose readerly caprice. As Ricoeur writes,

Word has the power to change our understanding of ourselves. This power does not originally take the form of an imperative. *Before addressing itself to the will as an order that must be obeyed, word addresses itself to what I have called our existence as effort and desire.* We are changed, not because a will is imposed on our own will; we are changed in the "listening that understands". (Ricoeur 1974, p. 454)

In reading aloud, the reader becomes a listener to the Word, a word of existential liberation that Kierkegaard facilitates.

We have seen that when we approach *FSE* with the Hegelian dialectic in mind as a hermeneutic device, Kierkegaard engenders the possibility of dislodgment from that dialectic. Kierkegaard seeks to do this, it seems, “in order to cause the need for grace to be felt deeply in genuine humble inwardness and, if possible, to prevent grace . . . from being taken totally in vain” (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 24). Rather than toil in labor to understand the text, rather than passively consume the text, readers are liberated to play with and enjoy the text. This text dislodges the reader from the dialectic of lordship and bondage, and this dislodgment is the experience of freedom and grace that Kierkegaard seeks to engender.

Yet I want to qualify this reading of the text because by so dislodging the single individual from the dialectic, Kierkegaard seems to remove those determinations that constitute personal identity. At least, inasmuch as social positioning and status are a function of intersecting social determinants, identity depends on varying forms of recognition by the powers that be (see Collins 2019). Readers, as much as the public, are often “like a drunken peasant; if you help him up on one side of the horse, he falls off on the other side” (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 24). A fruitful avenue for future research could bring together questions of intersectionality and critical race theory with Kierkegaardian existentialism. How can a self, under conditions of oppression in a white supremacist society, experience or work toward the self-realization promoted by Kierkegaard in *FSE* (see Lee 2014)?

Even with a professed concern for the single individual, Kierkegaard only seems to get at the “what” and the “how” of grace, but not at the “who” of grace. When Kierkegaard leverages the single individual out of the dialectic, he also removes those intersecting and determinate relations that constitute the “who”, the personal identity of the reader. Social markers often matter for marginalized communities, whereas those with social privilege can overlook their identity markers. Although his texts speak in this way, Kierkegaard is not speaking to just anyone; he is speaking to *his* reader, and the fact that it is *his* reader rather than someone else’s reader really matters to the “who” of who the reader is. Yet my criticism here might be asking something of Kierkegaard’s text that it was not intended to do, and quite possibly cannot do. Whatever the case may be about the status of the “who” of this text, one thing is clear: the writer of this text is not the silent monk arguing that faith is inexpressible in that it teleologically suspends the ethical (see Kierkegaard 1983; cf. Evans 2006); rather, the writer of this text is the gadfly who tests people and prods them to decisive action.

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